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AUTHOR	Webb, Marcus; Marsh, Dianne
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ABSTRACT

This report of the "Listen '95: Kids Can't Wait" conference presents the lives and concerns of Minnesota youth as described by the youth who participated in it. The issues of alcohol and drug abuse, violence, and education were the top concerns of the youth that participated in the first statewide conference in 1994. In focusing on these issues, participants at the 1995 conference were encouraged to seek solutions and ways they could take action. The solutions proposed included: (1) providing young people with more activities and places to go to help them stay away from using alcohol or drugs; (2) taking into account young people's suggestions on the issue of violence; and (3) promoting the participation of youth on school boards to make sure young people's voices are being heard. From the concerns and ideas articulated by conference participants, the Action for Children Youth Advisory Council developed a series of recommendations for dealing with drug and alcohol abuse, violence, and problems in education. These recommendations range from keeping community centers, arcades, and movie theaters open later to give bored youth an alternative to alcohol and drug use, to pressuring the media to stop promoting violence and establishing a school voucher system. (AA)

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ED 408 049

Minnesota's Youth

speak out

Report of the "Listen '95: Kids Can't Wait" Conference

September 1995

MN PLANNING

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Action for Children is a bipartisan, public and private group that stimulates public policy to improve conditions for Minnesota's children and families. Staff assistance is provided by Minnesota Planning.

Minnesota's Youth Speak Out — Report of the "Listen '95: Kids Can't Wait" Conference was prepared by Marcus Webb and Dianne Marsh.

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For more information or copies of *Minnesota's Youth Speak Out — Report of the "Listen '95: Kids Can't Wait" Conference*, contact:

MN PLANNING

658 Cedar St.
St. Paul, MN 55155
(612) 296-4156

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Upon request, *Minnesota's Youth Speak Out — Report of the "Listen '95: Kids Can't Wait" Conference* will be made available in an alternate format, such as Braille, large print or audio tape. For TDD, contact Minnesota Relay Service at (612) 297-5353 or (800) 627-3529 and ask for Minnesota Planning.

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SUMMARY

Alcohol and drug abuse, violence and education — three issues that greatly concern Minnesota's youth — were the focus of the "Listen '95: Kids Can't Wait" conference that drew 175 youth and others from around the state. The conference was convened by the Action for Children Youth Advisory Council on March 27, 1995, at the College of St. Catherine in St. Paul.

This report of the "Listen '95" conference gives insight into the lives and concerns of the state's young people. The issues of alcohol and drug abuse, violence and education were the ones that most concerned the youth who took part in the advisory council's first statewide conference in 1994. In focusing on these issues, participants at the 1995 conference were encouraged to seek solutions and ways they could take action.

Drinking is a major problem among youth, according to conference participants. Also of serious concern to them is the use of marijuana by young people. The youth strongly suggested providing young people with more activities and places to go, such as youth centers, to help them stay away from using alcohol or drugs.

Many youth say violence has a profound affect on their lives, dictating where they go, who they go with, how they go and how they think about other people. Controlling violence involving youth, they said, will require the active participation of young people in efforts that incorporate their ideas.

Schools fail to challenge students, conference participants charged. They urged more emphasis on "hands-on" and practical classes, along with more diversity in variety and content. The youth would like to see students serving on school boards to make sure young people's voices are being heard in an area that is so central to their lives.

Conference participants from the Twin Cities, suburbs, small towns and rural areas discussed these issues in focus groups facilitated by Youth Advisory Council members and other youth who were trained by Action for Children staff. Three of these groups were made up of adults, whose comments and observations also are noted in the sidebars. Closing the conference was a discussion between youth and a panel of policy-makers, educators, community activists and state agency managers about issues affecting Minnesota's young people.

From the concerns and ideas articulated by conference participants, the Action for Children Youth Advisory Council developed a series of recommendations for dealing with drug and alcohol abuse, violence and problems in education. These recommendations range from keeping community centers, arcades and movie theaters open later to give bored youth an alternative to alcohol and drug use to pressuring the media to stop promoting violence and establishing a school voucher system.

Action for Children, a nonpartisan group, was created in April 1991 by Governor Arne H. Carlson to study the lives of young Minnesotans, develop a vision of what their lives should be like and make recommendations to help the state achieve that vision. Action for Children was concerned about including young people's voices in its recommendations. Instead of selecting a token youth to sit on its board, it created the Youth Advisory Council to advise it on issues related to children and families. Designed to give youth a voice in state government, the Action for Children Youth Advisory Council is made up of 27 youth between the ages of 12 and 18 from throughout the state.

To encourage young people's participation in decisions that affect their lives, the Action for Children Youth Advisory Council has sponsored two statewide conferences that have explored issues of concern to Minnesota's youth.

At the first conference in 1994, youth from around the state identified a variety of issues of particular concern to them. These ranged from teen pregnancies to recreational activities to teen-parent relationships. The three issues of greatest concern were alcohol and drug abuse, violence and education.

These issues became the focus of the "Listen '95: Kids Can't Wait" conference, held on March 27, 1995, at the College of St. Catherine in St. Paul. This report reflects the insights, concerns and ideas of the 175 youth and others who took part in this conference. In focusing on these issues, participants were encouraged to seek solutions and ways they could take action.

Conference participants from the Twin Cities, suburbs, small towns and rural areas made up 16 focus groups that were facilitated by Youth Advisory Council members and other youth who were trained by Action for Children staff. Three of these groups were adults; their comments and observations are noted in this report, as well.

Closing the conference was a discussion between youth and a panel of policy-makers, educators, community activists and state agency managers about issues affecting Minnesota's young people. Pleased with the day's events overall, youth were frustrated by the panel discussion. Most felt that the dialogue was abstract and their questions insufficiently addressed.

Action for Children, a nonpartisan group, was created in April 1991 by Governor Arne H. Carlson to study the lives of young Minnesotans, develop a vision of what their lives should be like and make recommendations to help the state achieve that vision. Action for Children wanted to include young people's voices in its recommendations. Instead of selecting a token youth to sit on its board, it created the Youth Advisory Council to advise it on issues related to children and families. Designed to give youth a voice in state government, the Action for Children Youth Advisory Council is made up of 27 youth between the ages of 12 and 18 from throughout the state.

Alcohol and Drug Abuse

All of the adults agreed that drinking is a problem among youth, and they blamed teenage alcohol abuse on the widespread acceptance of drinking among adults. One adult commented, "We're teaching kids we need alcohol to have a good time."

Alcohol and drug abuse was the number one concern of youth attending the 1994 conference and continued to be a big concern of those at "Listen '95." All of the groups at "Listen '95" agreed that drinking is a major problem among youth. Giving rise to the problem, most felt, is the widespread acceptance of drinking in society and the lack of activities for young people. According to the Minnesota Student Survey, 41 percent of all Minnesota 12th graders and 19 percent of all ninth graders drank alcohol at least once a month in 1992.

Youth's use of marijuana was also a serious concern to conference participants. Eleven of the thirteen focus groups of youth said marijuana use is very common among their peers. Participants also reported that youth commonly use cocaine, LSD, steroids, speed and tobacco, among other drugs. The student survey found that 18 percent of 12th graders and 12 percent of ninth graders used marijuana and other drugs in 1992.

Alcohol Use

Every group agreed that drinking is a major problem in their schools. While it is a more serious problem in senior than in junior high school, some youth start drinking in the eighth and ninth grades. Young people think drinking is fun and often do not worry about the effect drinking alcohol may have on their grades, according to conference participants. They drink because of peer pressure or because they have nothing better to do.

Some participants argued that drinking is just a way to pass the time, but most agreed it is a problem. According to one youth, alcohol is a more serious problem than drugs "because it's easier to get and it's acceptable." Some youth maintained that "everyone drinks in small towns."

One group said young people drink so much because they attend so many parties. Youth drink at parties, they said, either because they have nothing else to do or to rebel.

One group brought up the serious health consequences of regular drinking, noting that young people who drink are also more likely to smoke cigarettes and marijuana. They said that youth drink and smoke to escape boredom or stress.

Some of the young people said their friends avoid alcohol because they know the consequences of drinking. "We don't drink because we care about ourselves," said one youth. Some athletes avoid drinking alcohol out of fear it will affect their performance.

Drug Use

Eleven of the thirteen groups said marijuana is commonly used by youth in school and in the community. "Marijuana is big," according to one youth, as is cocaine. Other drugs used by youth include LSD, steroids, tobacco, speed, over-the-counter and prescription medications, PCP, and crack.

Youth said that despite strict penalties, people in junior and senior high schools everywhere use drugs. One youth said, "Drinking isn't fun anymore, so [youths] do drugs." Drugs are easy to get, according to participants, though one group said they are not as widespread in the suburbs as they are in the cities. Another group said that youth who feel overly protected by their parents use drugs to rebel.

"Marijuana is more popular than alcohol," declared one adult participant, and many agreed that youth use it often and take it less seriously than other drugs because they do not believe it poses a significant threat to their health.

Peer Pressure

Conference participants were divided over the importance of peer pressure in youth's decision to drink alcohol. Some youth argued that using alcohol is "a personal choice" that is not affected by peer pressure. "If you are confident, you don't have a problem saying no to pressure," one young person asserted. Others agreed that drinkers "leave kids alone after they say no." But some youth insisted that peer pressure is subtle and often internalized as self-questioning: "Everyone else is drinking, so why don't I?" Citing incidents in which they were pressured to drink, these kids contended that peer pressure is the main reason young people start drinking. "People keep pushing you to try it," said one youth, while another pointed out the powerful effect that learning one's friends are drinking can have. All participants agreed that peer pressure is most powerful in the early teens and lessens as young people get older.

Like their youthful counterparts, adult participants were divided over the role played by peer pressure in encouraging drinking and drug use. Some felt boredom ultimately has a more significant effect, and others argued that society tells youth there is nothing wrong with drinking.

Obtaining Alcohol and Drugs

Adults thought that youth obtain alcohol from parents, older friends and siblings and by buying it themselves.

Youth get alcohol from parents, aunts and uncles, older brothers and sisters. They also take it from parents' liquor cabinets, steal it, stand outside liquor stores to ask older people to buy it for them and use false identification to buy it themselves. Many youth said that liquor stores do not check identification.

Young people get drugs from drug dealers and friends, often stealing the money for the purchase from their parents. Youth say obtaining drugs in high school is very easy. "Just three lockers down, I could get it," said one youth. Participants generally agreed that youth often start using drugs in the eighth grade and get into heavier drugs in high school. Youth said that drug use at the junior high level is as rampant as in high school, though not as obvious.

Alcohol and Drug Prevention

Adult participants suggested providing more community involvement, teen leadership councils and groups, night basketball and more positive leisure activities to help keep youth away from abusing drugs and alcohol. "Communities can play an important role in teenagers' lives, but they must be a part of the decision making process," said one adult.

Twelve out of thirteen groups said that television public service announcements, including the widely aired "This is your brain on drugs" spots, are ineffective and insufficient to get the message across that drugs are bad. "They're misplaced, oversimplified, low-budget and unrealistic," commented one youth. Another said they are "brushed off and laughed at. People 'channel surf' through them." Contrary to their purpose, the announcements "inform you of the availability and acceptance of drugs," according to one youth. Antidrug video messages that impress younger children have little or no impact on high school students, participants maintained, but those that discourage drinking and driving are effective. Television should offer more information on how to stop using drugs, youth said. One group questioned whether major sporting events should be sponsored by beer and liquor producers.

Conference participants made many suggestions on how to encourage youth not to use alcohol or drugs. The two most commonly offered were education and positive role models. Other ideas included offering family-oriented programs on avoiding substance abuse, presentations to youth by people who have had personal experience with drug or alcohol abuse, starting substance abuse education at an early age, using scare tactics, conducting positive peer groups and creating less corny media campaigns. Especially strong was the suggestion to provide more places to go and activities for youth, including youth and late-night activity centers, and church functions — "any alternative to a party," as one youth put it. Participants also encouraged the use of rehabilitation programs for youth who are caught using alcohol and drugs.

Violence

Violence was the second greatest concern of the youth who attended the "Listen '94" conference. They were particularly concerned about easy access to knives and guns.

While many felt that gang and racial altercations are the most prevalent forms of youth violence, adults were primarily concerned with domestic violence and the vulnerability of children.

All of the young people at the 1995 conference talked about violence in their neighborhoods, and many were troubled by increasing gang violence in all parts of Minnesota. Youth believe gangs are moving into suburbs and rural areas. One group said that while authorities talk a lot about gangs, they actually do very little to curb gang violence. Youth are also concerned about fighting, vandalism and theft. Some expressed their fear of murder, drive-by shootings, rape, racial incidents and arson.

Responses to the question "Where does violence occur in your community?" were varied. Most of the youth focus groups said stealing, fighting and racial altercations occur in and around schools. The Minnesota Student Survey found that 31 percent of 12th graders and 45 percent of

ninth graders had been involved in physical fights in 1992. Some youth at the conference argued that violence is a problem only in lower-income neighborhoods and downtown areas. Others said parties are scenes of drug- and alcohol-related violence. Violence also occurs in the home. The *Reflections of Social Change Survey of 1989* reported that 18 percent of Minnesota's 12th graders and 21 percent of its ninth graders were victims of or witnesses to family violence.

Many youth said they are afraid to venture outside certain areas or participate in some activities because of the potential for violence. "Violence affects where you go, who you go with, the way you carry yourself and the way you think about people," said one youth. One group reported that fear of muggings, rape and guns kept them from using city buses. According to the Minneapolis Health Department's *KIDSTAT* report, homicide was the leading cause of death for children age 15 to 19 in Minneapolis in 1991. It also reported that nearly half of the trauma admissions for children age 13 to 17 at Hennepin County Medical Center in that year resulted from gunshots, assaults or stabbings.

Violence in the Media

Participants were divided over the media's role in promoting violence. Some stated that heavy metal and hardcore rap music videos glorify violence; others suggested that song lyrics and violent images are symptoms of a violent culture and do not cause or increase violence. Some participants felt their lives had been adversely affected by television and were concerned that small children regularly watch violent programs such as "Power Rangers" and "Beavis and Butthead." Most of these participants thought parents should monitor their children's exposure to television. Some youth asserted that the media need to recognize that most people do not want to see so much violence. Programming should contain positive images because frustrated and angry people turn to television as a relief from the stress of their daily lives, according to participants. One group argued, however, that youth should take responsibility for their actions instead of blaming the media.

Many youth groups expressed much bitterness toward the media for stereotyping inner-city youth and African-Americans as violent. "The media is racist because it focuses on what gangs do and not the crimes committed by other people," said one youth. "All people see is violence committed by blacks." Other groups thought that the media stereotypes everyone who is not Caucasian. They also said that trailer parks, St. Paul's east- and west-side neighborhoods, Minneapolis' Broadway Avenue and north side, and the downtowns of both are negatively stereotyped.

Talk and cop shows, the news and "Power Rangers" were cited as particularly bad examples of television. One group said that the news was offensive, poorly conceived and too graphic. An adult participant commented, "Music videos promote unhealthy sexuality and violent behavior."

Most adults agreed that the media negatively stereotypes inner-city minorities, particularly African-American males. Neighborhoods that have a high concentration of minorities are portrayed as being violent.

Racial Violence

Racial incidents and violence in the schools concerned participants, who see these as problems more in urban than rural areas. One group said racial violence is concentrated in the suburbs, where it focuses on Asians. Immigrants are another target for racial violence, according to another group.

Weapons

Most of the youth focus groups said that young people in their communities carry weapons. Knives are the most common weapon, but some young people carry guns, chains and mace. Several groups said that people carry weapons "just to be cool," not to protect themselves. In one Wilder Foundation survey, 29 percent of urban kids and 14 percent of nonurban kids reported bringing weapons to school.

Agreeing that weapons are easily obtained, most adult participants felt that youth carry them to feel safe. Some expressed concern about suicidal teenagers having access to guns in their homes. Others commented that teens fail to report peers with weapons out of fear of confrontation. Some argued that security cameras should be placed in every hallway in school buildings.

Some adults argued that Minnesota's educational system is actually quite good. Compared to the rest of the country, they contended, Minnesota has educated and talented teachers. They emphasized, however, that every youth in the state is not getting the same education: some are not being educated properly because their school is in a city rather than a suburb or because their teachers are not culturally sensitive and do not know how to interact with them.

Adults also expressed some concern about the lack of parental involvement in the education of youth.

Adults felt that youth have some basic rights — to be safe in school, to be respected, to be fed a nutritious meal — but no way to procure them.

Young people obtain weapons from homes, gun stores, older friends, gangs, department stores and catalogs. Some are purchased, others are stolen. Several groups agreed that young people can get weapons almost anywhere. One group said that gun control laws do not affect a youth's access to weapons.

One young person said that he saw someone threatened with a knife. Another reported that people were beaten with lead bars from a high school weight room. One youth said female students carry mace at a high school because one was raped there.

Violence Prevention

Ideas on how to prevent violence spurred a lively discussion among participants. While many agreed that violent crime involving youth is on the rise, many argued that young people are not interested in the ideas pushed by various authority figures. Controlling this violence, these youth contended, will require the active participation of young people. Suggestions for preventing violence ranged from educational programs modeled on the Drug Abuse Resistance Education effort and beginning in grade school, to conflict resolution and peer mediation in schools, to neighborhood watch groups and anti-racism clubs. One group suggested tearing down housing projects; another advocated capital punishment. Several groups, bemoaning the lack of parental and other adult intervention, suggested city meetings to address the sources and prevention of violence.

Education

Several of the top 10 concerns at the "Listen '94" conference involved problems in education, such as lack of funding, ineffective teachers, racism, boredom and the lack of student involvement. The Youth Advisory Council decided to delve deeper into these issues at the "Listen '95" conference. Because young people spend such a large part of their time and energy in activities within the educational system, policy-makers and citizens should be seriously concerned that some youth think school has nothing to offer them, council members feel. According to the Minnesota Department of Education, 13,640 youth between seventh and 12th grades dropped out of Minnesota public schools in the 1992-93 school year — about 31 percent in the 12th grade and slightly more than 12 percent in the ninth grade.

Many conference participants contend that the schools in their communities, as well as across the nation, fail to challenge students and are inferior compared to schools in other parts of the world. Youth said that young people take advantage of a curriculum that is easy and especially weak in science, math and foreign languages. One youth said school "doesn't deal with what you need to know." Many participants agreed that too much money is spent on athletics and not enough on academics.

Although several participants thought they were receiving a fine education, nine out of the 13 youth focus groups felt that their schools are either boring or unchallenging. Once youth declared, "To learn anything, you have to get it yourself."

The quality of the teaching in Minnesota schools generated a passionate interchange among participants. Youth felt that many teachers are not really interested in teaching and that students can

relate better to younger teachers because they are not burned out. They dislike teachers who are impersonal and do not get to know their students.

Student Rights

Youth know they have rights, participants said, but teachers and school officials sometimes ignore those rights or fail to inform students of them. One youth commented, "I feel that miscommunication is a big part of the problems in schools. I think that one of the best ways to solve problems is to inform students, teachers, parents and other faculty members of their rights and boundaries as well as [those of] others around them."

Locker searches and dress codes are unpopular and, participants suggested, a violation of student rights. According to some youth, sexual harassment in school also needs to be confronted.

Youth on School Boards

Most focus groups felt that students should serve on local school boards. Many said it was "essential" or a "good idea" because youth could be heard and express their opinions. But many also said student representation would do no good, because students would be "puppets" who would neither be listened to nor have any influence.

Adults supported student representation and participation on school boards. One adult said, "It's obvious that students should be involved. They are consumers of the product."

Curriculum

Youth want a "hands-on" education and practical classes giving them information they can use in the real world. Participants, especially those who attend small schools, would like a more diverse curriculum with a greater selection of elective classes in such areas as business, the arts, computers and technology, women's issues, drama, law, geography and hands-on science. Some students would like smaller class sizes.

Participants said classes should be more challenging and greater emphasis should be put on foreign languages. Teachers should make learning more interesting, they said, and not just a matter of memorizing facts. Too often students are treated as passive recipients of knowledge, youth stated, while real learning occurs when students are engaged and self-directed. Another group of young people suggested that students should evaluate teachers to hold them accountable.

Most of the adults wanted to see added to curriculums more life-skills programs that deal with survival in the world outside of school. Suggested classes included budgeting and maintaining a savings account, volunteering, critical thinking and parenting skills.

Making Changes

Many felt that changes have to come from students, starting with more student involvement. Many young people urged that schools be given more money. Other suggestions included getting better principals, teachers and school officials, and making classes smaller. Giving students more rights, holding faculty responsible for students' learning and consistently levying rules and punishments were also suggested. Youth also felt that school should start later in the morning so they would be awake during their first two classes.

Conclusion

The "Listen '95" conference provided a forum for young people to voice their opinions and be heard. Participants want policy-makers to heed their message: Youth must be heard, and positive action must be taken now to respond to their concerns.

Adult participants agreed that young people's self-confidence and esteem should be an educational priority and that time should be set aside for students and teachers to discuss issues pertinent to young people's lives.

Based on the comments, ideas and suggestions of the participants in the "Listen '95" and "Listen '94" conferences, the Action for Children Youth Advisory Council has developed a series of recommendations addressing youths' concerns about drug and alcohol abuse, violence and education. State and local policy-makers and nonprofit organizations that target youth and school districts are encouraged to use these recommendations as guidelines when making policies and decisions that affect young Minnesotans.

"If adults don't get punished for using drugs, kids don't learn the real consequences," said one adult.

Alcohol and Drug Abuse

- Ensure that such places as movie theaters, arcades and community centers stay open longer so youth have more activities to help them stay away from using alcohol and drugs.

Adults felt that television plays a significant role in promoting violence.

- Improve advertisements aimed at preventing alcohol and drug abuse so young people will listen to them.

Violence

Adults felt that the best way to improve school conditions is to get parents and other adults who are part of students' lives involved.

- Encourage more adults to become positive role models for youth.
- Encourage young people to be more involved in school and community activities that promote violence prevention.
- Pressure the media to stop promoting violence.

Education

- Include students' voices and opinions on school boards and councils.
- Have students evaluate teachers.
- Require teachers to constantly upgrade their training and qualifications.
- Develop a more varied and multicultural curriculum.
- Establish a voucher system to foster competition between schools with the goal of improving teaching and encouraging a more diverse and engaging curriculum.
- Employ a more hands-on approach to teaching and learning.
- Require each student to be involved in some type of extracurricular activity.
- Select two or three high school students to serve on the local school board. At least one should be selected by peers and one chosen by faculty members.

Youth Advisory Council Members 1994 – 1995

The Action for Children Youth Advisory Council 1994-95 members who organized and planned the "Listen '95: Kids Can't Wait" Conference are listed below. Many of them facilitated small group discussions at the conference.

Stephanie Alexander
St. Paul

Kristyn Bell
Stillwater

Peter Carlson
Chaska

Adrian Carter
Minneapolis

Joe Duchene
Minneapolis

Missee Dixon
Wadena

Tommica Edwards
Minneapolis

Bryce Ehrman
International Falls

Kenechi Ejebe
Plymouth

Kaia Flom
Little Falls

Peter Frosch
Winona

Michael Helgeson
Parkers Prairie

Jillian Johnson
Wells

Tammy Marinac
Hibbing

Leakhena Mom
Vadnais Heights

Molly Moore
Northfield

Lena Perez-Cajina
Savage

Andrew Pritchard
Stillwater

Mari Quenemoen
Dawson

Josh Ross
Granite Falls

Christine Scherping
Freeport

LeAnn Slama
Janesville

Kao Vang
Brooklyn Center

Ma Vang
St. Paul

Courtney Whitcraft
Coon Rapids

Yer Xiong
Minneapolis

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658 Cedar Street
St. Paul, MN 55155